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ABSTRACT

North Carolina's 1999 Governor's Task Force on Youth Violence and School Safety produced a report that generated 10 action items and 6 main recommendations. This research bulletin presents a follow-up to the task force's efforts. It begins by providing background information about the task force and putting its work into context. It then discusses the 10 action items and updates their status. A brief review of the task force's main recommendations follows with an assessment of where the state of North Carolina now stands on these recommendations. The bulletin concludes with suggestions for future actions, which include continued emphasis on educating parents and others about the early warning signs of youth problems; incorporating accountability measures in school-safety plans; and proper training of future teachers and administrators. (WFA)

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May 2002

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RESEARCH BULLETIN
Center for the Prevention of School Violence
North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

YOUTH VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL SAFETY TASK FORCE HAS LASTING IMPACT

INTRODUCTION

North Carolina's 1999 Governor's Task Force on Youth Violence and School Safety produced a report which generated ten action items and six main recommendations. An examination of efforts put forth with regard to the action items and recommendations since the work of the Task Force was completed in August, 1999, reveals a lasting impact that evidences a continuation of North Carolina's leadership in school safety as well as an evolution of the state's approach with regard to linking safe school efforts with juvenile justice and delinquency prevention.

The following bulletin revisits the Task Force's efforts by first providing background information about the Task Force and putting its work into context. It then highlights the action items by updating their status. A brief review of the Task Force's main recommendations follows with an assessment of where we now stand on these recommendations. Finally, given what the bulletin reveals about where we stand, brief suggestions for where we need to go are offered as we move forward with youth violence prevention and school safety in North Carolina.

BACKGROUND

April, 1999, saw the landscape of school safety efforts forever changed when the nation experienced the rage and violence of two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Although thousands of miles away, the events at Columbine impacted North Carolina schools by redefining how school safety and youth violence were viewed. The comfort of distance did not lend itself to a confidence that such events could not happen here.

Unlike many states, North Carolina was no stranger to school safety efforts when Columbine occurred. North Carolina had held its first Task Force on School Violence in 1993 when concerns about less safety and more violence in schools surfaced. The Task Force produced four main recommendations:

1. Toughen weapon laws.
2. Deal with violent students.
3. Focus resources on schools.
4. Strengthen the system.

One of the charges given the 1999 Task Force by then Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., was a review of the impact of the 1993 Task Force. An additional charge was to identify success stories as well as gaps in the school safety efforts that were being pursued in the state.

Governor Hunt put the Task Force on a short time line as there was a desire to put forth

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recommendations before the start of school year 1999 - 2000. Then Department of Crime Control Task Force with then Attorney General Mike Easley and Superintendent Mike Ward named cochairs. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence, then a part of the University of North Carolina Center for School Leadership Development, was asked to facilitate five Task Force meetings as well as six town hall meetings which were held throughout the state.

Concentrating on "home, school, and community," the fifty-one Task Force members examined research and heard testimony which highlighted that the occurrence of violent incidents in schools is complex in genesis and requires multiple responses. Representing a wide spectrum of view points, the members ultimately achieved consensus on six main recommendations and thirty-seven sub recommendations. The main recommendations were:

1. All parents must be involved in their children's education.

2. Student involvement is essential to promoting school safety.

3. Every school should be given the tools needed to develop and implement stronger school safety plans, including a set of accountability standards to measure the progress of their plan.

4. Support efforts to provide every student and every school staff member with a school environment free from violence and the threat of violence, conducive to learning, and characterized by caring, respect for all, and sensitivity to diversity.

5. Early identification of risk factors and behavioral problems must take place. Prevention and intervention strategies can be best implemented through early identification.

6. Everyone must take responsibility for the communities where our youth are raised.

and Public Safety Secretary Richard Moore was name chairman of the The recommendations reflect the understanding of the Task Force members that efforts to address youth violence and school safety must involve homes, schools, and communities and that there must be a collaborative framework for these domains to work together as efforts are put forth to prevent youth violence and maintain safe schools.

CONTEXT

The 1999 Task Force on Youth Violence and School Safety operated on the heels of a major reform of juvenile justice in North Carolina. It also met at the same time the State Board of Education sponsored the work of the Task Force on Disruption-free Classrooms. All of these efforts set the stage for action in Fall, 1999; however, much of the energy of the state was redirected when Hurricane Floyd hit in September.

With the attention and resources of the state focused on disaster recovery, steps taken with regard to many of the thirty-seven sub recommendations generated by the Task Force's work were slowed. However, Governor Hunt was committed to ensuring that follow through on recommendations be the legacy of the Task Force and, therefore, responded with a request that ten "action items" be pursued as quickly as possible so that school year 1999-2000 would be impacted.

ACTION ITEMS

The ten items highlighted for action (see next page) involve communicating the recommendations of the Task Force and educating various school safety stakeholders about them. Parents, students, boards of education, superintendents, teachers, School Resource Officers, and others are identified in the items. Being proactive and collaborative in school safety and violence prevention efforts is emphasized.

ACTION ITEMS

1. Set up a statewide toll-free anonymous tip line to respond to threats to school safety.

2. Send an early warning signs brochure to every parent in North Carolina.

3. Ask the State Board of Education to study safe school plans, how they are written and how they are carried out.

4. Send the final report with ideas for action to every school superintendent in North Carolina.

5. Ask principals to hold meetings at their schools with law enforcement, community leaders, parents and students to discuss their safe school plans.

6. Send the final report with ideas for action to every local board of education in North Carolina.

7. Ask every PTA/PTO president to discuss "how we make this school safer" at one of their first meetings of the school year.

8. Hold local student summits about school safety during the school year – culminating in the statewide Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.) summit.

9. Brief all School Resource Officers (SROs) and other law enforcement personnel about Task Force recommendations and how they can carry them out.

10. Ask the Center for the Prevention of School Violence to set up a conflict management project – resulting in all pre-service teachers and all administrators being trained to better manage conflict.

Efforts were put forth on each action item although some required only that the final report be sent to local authorities for consideration and possible action. By far the items which continue to have impact are those that involve the statewide tip line, early warning signs and parents, safe school plans, PTA safe school efforts, student involvement, School Resource Officers, and the Center for the Prevention of School Violence's conflict management project.

Action Item 1: Statewide Tip Line: The North Carolina Safe Schools Tip Line has been operating since February, 2000. Structured as a public-private partnership between the state of North Carolina and Pinkerton Services in Charlotte, North Carolina, the tip line has handled several hundred calls ranging from those that communicate concerns about chronic safety issues such as inadequate lighting to those which involve "imminent danger" such as the possibility of guns on campus. The tip line's accompanying educational campaign emphasizes that the first choice for reporting should be "in person on school site" and that the line should be implemented as a "last resort" line for callers who have concerns about on-site reporting.

The two years of calls handled by the line confirms that verbal threats and bullying are concerns particularly expressed by middle school students. Additionally, the two years of service confirm that such lines work best when an active educational campaign accompanies the line's provision.

The current operation of the tip line is set to continue through school year 2002-2003. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence is examining possible options for continuing the line into the future based upon lessons learned from the project and growth in the tip-line service industry.

Action Item 2: Early Warning Signs and Parents: Both the educational campaign which accompanies the North Carolina Safe Schools Tip Line and the Department of Public Instruction provided early warning signs information to parents across the state. Additionally, because many other organizations picked up on the early warning signs lesson of Columbine, information about the signs continues to be available to parents and others who work with youth. Requests for this information as well as for staff development sessions for schools continue to be received by the Center for the Prevention of School Violence.

Action Item 3: Safe School Plans: School system safe school plans were mandated in North Carolina in 1997 with first submission of plans to the Department of Public Instruction in 1998. Building-level safe school plans were to be aligned with school system plans. The Task Force in 1999 was able to determine that the first round of plans was not generated under the best conditions because the legislation was passed late in the General Assembly's session. In order to meet local deadlines for approving the plans before sending them to the state, both systems and schools sped up what was to be, based upon the components of the planning legislation, a very deliberate and collaborative planning process. Despite these difficulties, all the systems in the state submitted plans which addressed legislative requirements.

Each school system plan provided descriptions of strategies that were implemented in the school system. The overarching strategies that were prevalent in all the plans focused on an array of topics from school building security and school safety technology to programs intended to foster student success employing teacher-driven and student-initiated approaches. A final focus was placed on school-wide strategies and policies. Codes of conduct, zero-tolerance policies, and other comprehensive programs (e.g., conflict management, character education, and law-related education) were all included in the plans. Each system included extensive approaches that in combination lent themselves to establishing and maintaining safe learning environments.

The 1999 Task Force determined that while the plans met legislative requirements and, in many instances, "looked good on paper," concerns existed that the plans were not being implemented effectively. Several weak areas were highlighted during Task Force discussions of the plans: collaboration with law enforcement; meaningful participation by parents and students in the formulation of the plans; the comprehensiveness of the plans with regard to complete treatment of prevention, intervention, and crisis response; planning processes conducted with a foundation of data and understanding of school needs; inclusion of appropriate staff development to support the plan; and accountability to ensure the effectiveness of the plans and planning process.

A second round of safe school planning took place in school year 1999-2000 with amended planning legislation guiding these efforts. With the amended legislation, more emphasis of identification and treatment of at-risk youth was to be included in this round of planning. Overall the plans submitted in 2000 included more information about what school systems were actually doing programmatically. The plans provided more in-depth descriptions of system-wide strategies being employed and also focused more on strategies in individual classrooms. The systems met the amended requirements by incorporating more explanations of how they address their at-risk youth populations.

The Center for the Prevention of School Violence's content analysis of the second round of plans revealed some areas still in need of improvement: data and needs-driven planning; linkage of needs to programs; inclusion of all stakeholders in the planning process; and the performance of physical site assessments. The analysis concluded that the plans overall evidenced improvement from the first round. However, as the third round of planning is about to take place in school year 2002-2003, there is continued concern that implementation may not be taking place because there is no accountability mechanism in place for determining effectiveness.

Action Item 4: Superintendents: Superintendents across the state were sent the Task Force report in the fall of 1999. A letter accompanying the report asked the superintendents to consider the ideas offered and to act according to their needs. The safe school planning efforts of 1999-2000 described earlier were suggested as the obvious outlet for their actions. The improvement of the plans submitted in 2000 can be in some ways

attributed to the superintendents taking the Task Force's work into account in their system plans. Most obvious was the improvement associated with ensuring that collaboration with law enforcement was fleshed out and that staff development opportunities were supportive of the plans.

Because of the reform of juvenile justice in North Carolina in 1999, superintendents (or their designees) are legislatively-mandated members of the juvenile crime prevention councils (JCPCs) which exist in each county in the state. These JCPCs oversee local collaborative efforts in the arena of delinquency prevention and juvenile justice. Community forums held throughout the state in 2001 by the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention revealed uneven levels of involvement by the superintendents in the JCPCs with some being very active, some supportive through designees, and some not taking any interest or providing support.

Action Item 5: Principals: Having identified inclusion of parents and students in the planning process as one of the weaknesses of the first round of planning, principals were encouraged to hold meetings with them as well as with law enforcement and community leaders to discuss safe school plans. Even though this inclusion of stakeholders was still somewhat lacking as described in the 2000 plans, more inclusion was evidenced in the plans and the planning processes that were undertaken at the building level.

Action Item 6: School Boards: All North Carolina school boards received copies of the Task Force report with the suggestion that "ideas for action" follow. School boards have continuously taken actions to support safe school efforts as they have reviewed safe school plans, passed policies to define appropriate conduct, and supported efforts such as the School Resource Officer (SRO) program. Areas of concern involving school boards since the Task Force's work include support of efforts for quality alternative education and continued funding, given budget challenges, for popular programs such as SRO programs. The impact of zero-tolerance policies on the educational process also involves boards as they often must make decisions that are related to such policies or approaches. According to the 2000 system plans, twenty-three school systems implement zero-tolerance polices. Likely more do so but do not explicitly state that they do in their plans.

Action Item 7: PTA/PTO: A constant theme of the Task Force's work was the importance of parents in efforts to make schools safe. Every PTA/PTO was provided information about the Task Force and asked to hold meetings to discuss how to make "this school safer." The status of this emphasis of parent involvement is best illustrated by the North Carolina PTA which has made safe schools one of its top areas of focus.

Additionally, the work of the Center for the Prevention of School Violence since the Task Force evidences increasing interest by parents in safe school efforts. More parents call the Center for assistance with motivations ranging from a desire to be involved to concerns about physical security and other issues. An area of extreme interest voiced by parents is the problem of bullying in our schools. Parents of victims and sometimes even of the bullies themselves are seeking assistance with this. The Department of Public Instruction reissued a brochure on the subject last year, and the Attorney General's Office in collaboration with the Center for the Prevention of School Violence and other stakeholders are in the beginning stages of an anti-bullying campaign which will in part be directed to parents.

Action Item 8: Students: Student involvement in safe school efforts has increasingly been recognized as essential, and students were targeted by the Task Force to become more involved with such efforts. Recent studies emphasize that "school connectedness" is a critical component of student engagement with

school efforts and is certainly part of the picture of student success.

In North Carolina, a major student involvement movement has taken hold and now serves as a national model for such involvement. Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.) was growing in North Carolina at the time the Task Force met in 1999, but no one at that time predicted that S.A.V.E. would grow to such an extent that a national nonprofit would spin off from the state's S.A.V.E. effort. Although now national in focus, S.A.V.E. is still dominated by North Carolina with almost 600 chapters and 64,000 students involved in the nonviolence effort at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The seventh annual S.A.V.E. summit was held in April, 2002, in Raleigh, and brought together students from across the state and nation.

Action Item 9: School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (SROs) were briefed about the Task Force report and asked to consider how they could further assist efforts to make schools safer. North Carolina has a long history with the SRO approach and is currently providing five SRO programs as model pilots for a national assessment of SRO effectiveness. There are more SROs serving in the state's schools now than when the Task Force met in 1999 with some 687 SROs. Almost ninety percent of high schools and seventy-six percent of middle schools receive SRO coverage of some sort. New in the census for school year 2001-2002 was that seven percent of elementary schools also receive coverage. This latter statistic is of note because the Task Force was concerned that there was a lack of understanding that the SRO approach can be a prevention as well as an intervention and crisis response approach.

Also of concern was middle school coverage which has grown since 1999 by about twenty-five percent and per-student coverage which relates to size of school and number of SROs. This latter issue is still of concern as the exception to the rule in the state is placement of more than one SRO in a school even if it is a large school.

Action Item 10: Preservice Teacher Training: The last action item generated from the Task Force report asked that the Center for the Prevention of School Violence set up a preservice teacher training project focusing on better preparation of future teachers in conflict management. The Center was able to secure funding from the United States Department of Justice - Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to conduct the project which involved the development of conflict management curricula for future teachers and also for future administrators. It developed a collaborative relationship with the University of North Carolina Center for School Leadership and formed a project advisory board from the University of North Carolina's colleges/schools of education. It also involved private teacher preparation programs and worked with the licensure section of the Department of Public Instruction to enhance conflict management competencies. The Center is in the final stages of finishing the curricula and will be working to disseminate the materials generated from the project as well as to expand their usefulness. Because of the nature of the model created, there is some hope that the materials will be of assistance in the closing the achievement gap's efforts to better address future teacher preparation.

Overall, the action items generated by the Task Force's work evidence that North Carolina at the local and state levels continues to move forward with its you violence prevention and school safety efforts despite the challenges that natural disasters and tighter budgets have wrought. Although many of the thirty-seven sub recommendations have not been acted upon, the action item strategy was a good one to follow as it allowed a focus on specific steps and responsible stakeholders.

THE MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS: WHERE WE STAND

The six main recommendations of the Task Force are worthy of brief review as they provide an indication of where North Carolina was on safe schools in 1999 and a starting point for some suggestions about where we need to go in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ONE: All parents must be involved in their children's education.

TWO: Student involvement is essential to promoting school safety.

THREE: Every school should be given the tools needed to develop and implement stronger school safety plans, including a set of accountability standards to measure the progress of their plan.

FOUR: Support efforts to provide every student and every school staff member with a school environment free from violence and the threat of violence, conducive to learning, and characterized by caring, respect for all, and sensitivity to diversity.

FIVE: Early identification of risk factors and behavioral problems must take place. Prevention and intervention strategies can be best implemented through early identification.

SIX: Everyone must take responsibility for the communities where our youth are raised.

Recommendation One: Although the notion that parents should be involved in the educational lives of their children seems all too obvious, the Task Force in 1999 felt a strong desire to emphasize with recommendation one that parents are their children's first teachers and that ultimately, as Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Secretary George Sweat says, "Safe schools begin at home." At the time of the Task Force, Sweat was director of the Office of Juvenile Justice and a member of the Task Force. The transformation of the Office to the Department allowed the transition of the Center for the Prevention of School Violence into the comprehensive strategy for juvenile justice and delinquency prevention that the state put forth with its juvenile justice reform efforts mentioned earlier. This comprehensive strategy is built upon the same understanding that the Task Force used with the linkage of "home, school, community" in its approach. Whether working on issues which explicitly involve safe schools or issues which involve at-risk youth, delinquency prevention, juvenile justice, or positive youth development, the "home" or parent component must be acknowledged, advocated for, and advanced by all of the stakeholders who work for youth in the state. With the relatively new Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and its strong commitment to collaboration with others at the state and local levels in place, the recognition of the importance of parent involvement in all aspects of the lives of their children, not just the educational lives of their children, is moving forward.

Recommendation Two: As discussed earlier, the role of students is essential in safe school efforts. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence continues to emphasize with its vision for safe schools that "every student should attend a school that is safe and secure, one that is free of fear and conducive to learning." Maintaining a focus on students in safe school efforts is the general message the Task Force wished to communicate when it offered recommendation two. Providing communication avenues such as the statewide tip line, extra-curricular programs such as S.A.V.E., after-school programs such as Support Our Students (S.O.S.), and opportunities for community service were offered by the Task Force as means to keep the student focus and to keep students involved and, importantly as noted earlier, connected.

Recommendation Three: Ensuring that the every school has the needed tools to make itself safe is the gist of recommendation three offered by the Task Force. While much of the focus of this recommendation was safe school planning, an important sub recommendation associated with it was that schools "closely collaborate with

the appropriate local crisis response agencies, including law enforcement and local governments, to ensure that strong communication and rapid response are established at the local level in the event of emergencies." The recent collaborative effort directed at critical incident response which Attorney General Roy Cooper led with the collaborative support of the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention - Center for the Prevention of School Violence and Department of Public Instruction addressed this sub recommendation. Funded by support from the Governor's Crime Commission, the "tools" of a critical incident response booklet, video, and starter kit were put in the hands of schools, law enforcement, and emergency responders to better prepare for and respond to incidents of a critical nature.

Recommendation Four: The Task Force's intent with recommendation four was communicating that an emphasis on the environment or "climate" of a school is essential and that the environment of the school be one that, above all else, allows learning to take place for *all* students. While many of the sub recommendations associated with this recommendation have not been acted upon because they require funding (e.g., a middle school SRO initiative; expansion of Teen Court programs), worthy of note are several sub recommendations which have received at least attention if not funding: school / classroom size; threat assessment and response; character education; alternative education; and suspension and expulsion policies and programs.

Recommendation Five: The theme of prevention underlies recommendation five from the Task Force as an emphasis on early identification of risk factors and behavioral problems is seen "as the first step to take in prevention and intervention efforts." In general, this area of safe schools and positive youth development has received the most attention and provided the greatest gains as there is increasing understanding of the need to be prevention-oriented with regard to whole school efforts and intervention-oriented with regard to at-risk and high-risk youth. More assessments of "warning signs" and risk factors are being conducted both in schools and within North Carolina's juvenile justice system. Additional assessments of risk factors and needs at the community level are also taking place in communities throughout the state. The notion of prevention defined in terms of early age or with regard to prevention back into the juvenile justice system is being expanded to prevention with regard to precursor behaviors to disruptive, delinquent, and violent behaviors and even with regard to what adults can do with their own behaviors to reduce the potential for school or youth violence.

Recommendation Six: As the Task Force report notes with regard to recommendation six: "The work of the Task Force reemphasizes that everyone must be involved in efforts directed at reducing youth violence and making our schools safer." The state has experienced since the 1999 Task Force more efforts to get people involved. School systems have worked diligently at collaborative safe school planning and are now, in particular, hard at work with law enforcement and emergency responders to ensure that responses to critical incidents are "at the ready." Communities are employing the juvenile crime prevention council approach and are beginning to see the benefits of such collaborations. The state through its many youth-focused and youth-serving agencies and departments is "talking the talk" of collaboration and increasingly "walking the walk." And as the Task Force encouraged in 1999, more people are realizing that each of us has responsibility "to take action when warranted to create the type of society which will allow youth to grow and develop successfully."
The reform of the juvenile justice system in the state which predated the 1999 Governor's Task Force on Youth Violence and School Safety provides an opportunity for such action through its definition of a continuum of youth development which begins with attention paid to the positive development of all youth and flows through increasing levels of intervention with

youth who are at risk, delinquent, or placed into juvenile justice system programs or facilities. The linkage of these efforts to those North Carolina has put forth to provide safe schools blends them in ways that offer a great opportunity for the needs of all of youth to be addressed. North Carolina's linkage of safe school efforts with juvenile justice and delinquency prevention in this way continues the state's leadership nationally in the arena of school safety as the holistic approach operationalizes the fact that the children and youth in our schools are the same children and youth who are at risk and sometimes become involved in the juvenile justice system.

THE FUTURE: WHERE WE NEED TO GO

Given that the opportunity for action exists, where do we need to go in the future? Obviously efforts which further the impact of the Task Force's specific action items must continue. The tip line's future beyond school year 2002-2003 is being assessed based upon its operation to date. Continued emphasis on educating parents and others about early warning signs needs to take place with more emphasis being placed upon responsiveness to the identifications that can be made as well as more emphasis being placed upon threat assessment capabilities and techniques. Safe school plans need to be especially focused upon as the third round of planning commences in the coming school year, and the lack of accountability mechanisms with regard to implementation may yet need to be addressed. Continued and in some cases enhanced involvement of superintendents, principals, school boards, parents and parent organizations, students, and School Resource Officers in safe school efforts must occur. And continued enrichment of the preparation future teachers (and future administrators) experience needs to take place.

With regard to the legacy of the main recommendations, the importance of parent and student involvement, of implementable safe school plans, of school climates that present as caring environments for *all* students, and of prevention and intervention strategies as they link to early identification processes must continue to be recognized and actions must be taken to enhance what has already been done. Most importantly, the responsibility that everyone has for the positive development of our youth cannot be overemphasized as we move forward. Every individual and each community in North Carolina must take an interest in, become involved with, and invest on behalf of our youth.

CONCLUSION

The 1999 Governor's Task Force on Youth Violence and School Safety generated a report that could have been washed away by Hurricane Floyd; instead its action items and main recommendations continue to have impact. Although challenges faced by the State precluded efforts on many of the sub recommendations of the Task Force, the wisdom of the action item approach as well as of the messages reflected in the Task Force's main recommendations have continued North Carolina's leadership in the arena of school safety.

The fact that the Task Force followed juvenile justice reform and was able to take that reform into account, additionally, has allowed the state's safe school efforts to link with juvenile justice and delinquency prevention efforts. This linkage has generated a framework from which the need of all North Carolina's youth to be educated in safe and secure schools, ones that are free of fear and conducive to learning, can be better pursued and ultimately made a reality throughout the state.

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